

Title: Breath of Heaven  
Date: December 3, 2023  
Subject: the hope we have in Jesus Christ  
Scripture: Hebrews 11:8 – 16; 1 Peter 1:8 - 16

Abram, you've been sitting in the hot desert sun for too long. It's making you a little crazy. What are you thinking? Moving because some disembodied voice told you to go? What if it was a dream? We've all had lots of weird dreams. How do you know your dream wasn't the result of camel's milk that was spoiled?

You know how far you're talking about traveling? The merchants who've journeyed that far tell us it takes three to four months by camel. That's a long way man, a lot of going up and down, up and down. From what we hear it's not the safest journey even though there are lots of people on the caravan routes. Lots of people, lots of all kinds of people including robbers, marauders and those ready to cheat you out of your camel.

We know you said God said you'd have children and become a great nation. We've heard you say that again and again, but Sarah's getting up there in years and she hasn't any kids yet. She ain't getting any younger and you're no spring chicken. Why don't you just stay here and have a comfortable life? You've got it good here. You're rich. Everyone respects you. Everyone wants to be you.

It doesn't seem like there's anything we can say or do that'll convince you to stay. It was nice knowing you. We'll probably never hear anything more from you or about you as you chase after some pipe dream.

That could be the way people thought about Abram as he prepared to make his epic journey - not just to the promised land but his walk with God who told him about the promised land. The initial story of Abram is in Genesis and is woven through the rest of the Bible. Our initial landing point this morning is Hebrews 11. There we find a quick summation of Abraham's life, the man who'd previously been called Abram.

Read Hebrews 11:8 – 10.

Abraham began his journey in Ur. He went northwest along the Euphrates River and then turned southward to enter Canaan. He made a brief pit stop and journeyed further southwest to Egypt before returning back to Canaan. He lived in tents not in a house made of stone, clay or wood. He was a stranger in a foreign country as he was looking to the future, to "a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

The promises given to him were far reaching: having children, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, be made into a great nation and all people on earth would be blessed through him.

Abraham wasn't the only one to look beyond this life, to realize there's more beyond this existence. In the middle of Abraham's example is an observation about all the people in the chapter.

Read Hebrews 11:13 – 16.

These people shared similar things. They were living by faith when they died. They hadn't received the thing for which they were trusting God. They were looking forward for him to fulfill his promise. They had an attitude of hope as they looked into the distance. They lived on earth as aliens and strangers because they

believed they had a different, better and permanent home. It'd be a place they could truly call their own. They could've turned their attention, desires and dreams to the earthly country, but they didn't. They directed their attitudes, intentions and longings to the better country, a heavenly one.

It's important to note God's response for the people who lived this way. He's not ashamed to be called their God. Ashamed is used by each of the 32 translations I checked. That's not super impressive as I didn't pick up a Bible, find Hebrews 11:1, pick up the next one. Biblehub.com lists them so all I had to do was scan to see if the word was there and count. "Ashamed" is an interesting word choice. It's beyond that. It's an intriguing and maybe baffling one. How can God be ashamed? Is that even part of his being?

God didn't feel any shame about the connection. He was proud of the fact they had faith, trust and confidence in him. He has prepared a place for them, a place called heaven, the home of God and the home of those who place their trust in him. He was willing to allow himself to be called their God and friend.

Let's move ahead in the Bible to the first chapter of 1 Peter. The opening of the chapter expresses praise to God for the tremendous things he has given. Read 1 Peter 1:3, 4.

The text points out that the fullness and completion of salvation is ready to be revealed in the last time. In the meantime, we can rejoice, even though we suffer grief and encounter trials.

Read 1 Peter 1:8 - 12.

The vacation part of our trip out West with son Nate and his wife Sierra took us through the scenic Rocky Mountains. Lots of snow for late May and early June. I'm glad we weren't traveling much earlier in the year or we may have had to put on chains, which we didn't have. I'm not sure how that would've worked. And the tunnels may not have been open. It's quite an experience to drive through tunnels and think of all the weight of the mountain, the pressure pushing down and the engineering to keep tunnels from collapsing. There's always relief when can see the light at other end of the tunnel, but even more when you've exited the tunnel.

The tunnel analogy fits the condition of Christians. The first recipients were the elect, strangers in the world scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They didn't see Jesus while he was alive and couldn't see him at the time of writing because Jesus had ascended to heaven. They were living in a tunnel which prevented them from physically seeing Jesus. Though they didn't have that privilege, they loved him, believed in him and were filled with joy because they were receiving the goal of their faith which is the salvation of their souls. They were looking ahead to the end of the tunnel.

We also live in a tunnel as we weren't around 2000 years ago to see and hear Jesus. We have more light in our tunnel because we have the completed word of God. People of the first century didn't have ready access to it and some had been written at the time of 1 Peter. Though we have more light, our vision isn't complete. We're still looking ahead to the light that will take place when we get to heaven.

The people who lived in a darker tunnel were those before Christ came. This included the prophets of the Old Testament. They received God's revelation and he inspired them to put some of it into books of the Bible but they had limited knowledge and didn't completely grasp God's message about the coming Christ.

Certainly, the wicked prophet Balaam didn't get it when he said "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). He may have understood about the judgment to be executed on Moab but he didn't get Jesus Christ would be the star from Jacob or he wouldn't have acted the way he did but would have put his trust in God.

What about Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah who received these messages: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (Isa 7:14). I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). The days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch (Jer 23:5). But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel (Micah 5:2).

The prophets were a lot like us and would've sought more understanding. "What was that God? Okay. I got it. Sounds good. You're going to deliver your people and judge your enemies. Great! When? You're not going to tell me. There's more? Not sure what that means. Could you explain it? Could you at least give me a hint? Does it mean? How about? That's all you're going to tell me. Please. Isn't there something else?"

They searched intently and with the greatest care to find out when the Christ would come, what he'd go through and what it would be like afterwards. They sought, probed, wondered, pondered, inquired, searched, investigated, did their best to discover what it all meant but couldn't find the answers they desperately wanted.

Many prophets lived in depressing times and horrible conditions. They were treated as outcasts who plied on people's emotions to raise false hope. Isaiah was alive when his country was being threatened and was to give a message to people that they wouldn't pay any attention to him or what God had to say. Jeremiah was severely mistreated and left to die in a pit. To many people the promises delivered through the prophets began to sound like the hollow scrambled ramblings and meanderings of some old man's discombobulated mind.

And yet the prophets and a small remnant hung on the Lord's words. They clung to hope. You might say it was the hope of the hopeless.

The prophets understood they weren't serving themselves or the people in their immediate context. They were serving those who would live after Jesus Christ came to reveal himself as the Savior of the world.

What about the angels? We can't skip over them. It says even the angels longed to look into these things. They stooped down and looking intently but salvation through Christ wasn't for them.

Based on the knowledge the tunnel we live in isn't going to last forever, we're to do certain things as indicated by the therefore of v. 13. The rest of the book, except for the last four verses, is comprised of imperatives, exhortations and commands. Obviously, we can't look at all of them. We'll look at some of the initial ones. You can read the rest as a homework assignment.

We begin with the heart attitude. The last part of v. 13 says "set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." Don't set your hope on the institutions, organizations and things of this world. They will all disappear. Set hope on the grace that will come. Look forward to the end of the tunnel. Go on a hope hunt.

One way is listen to Christmas music. Listen for words about hope, confidence in God, looking forward, expectancy. Do the same as you read Scripture. You could read the Christmas narratives in the second half of Matthew 1 and first 20 verses of Luke 2 again and again and again. Think how the various people reacted and responded. You can expand into the genealogies of Matthew 1 and the story of the wise men in chapter 2, as well as Luke 1 and the rest of Luke 2, and even the beginning of John 1.

We're to engage our minds, prepare them for action. Readers of the first century would understand the word picture of gathering up long flowing garments, tucking them in or tying them up to be ready for action. The idea is to be in control of the mind by tying up the loose ends of life, taking care of distractions so we can focus on the things that are important - like the grace to be given when Christ is revealed. We could express through an acrostic for hope – heaven our possession eventually and eternally.

Another action is to live self-controlled lives as obedient children. Don't live the way we did under the pull of evil desires when we lived in ignorance, but live holy, set apart lives as we desire to live to please God.

As followers of Jesus Christ we celebrate Christmas unlike other people. People who don't know him as Savior may have tons of tinsel and gobs of garland, but without hope, it's a temporary experience. In and because of Christ, we have hope, a reaction to life based on trusting God's promises. Hope can calm the heart. Hope can provide clarity as it sees beyond the current into the future so it can impact the present. That's worth celebrating by worshiping, singing, decorating, giving.

Mary, the young woman who would become the mother of Jesus, struggled with the idea. She, a virgin who was pledged to be married, would have God Incarnate grow and develop inside her? She was the one through whom the Son of God would be born though she was a sinful human?

The moving song Breath of Heaven pictures Mary as waiting and frightened. She's weary, wondering "In a world as cold as stone must I walk this path alone." She calls out to God, "Be with me now. Breath of heaven, hold me together. Be forever near me, Breath of Heaven. Breath of Heaven lighten my darkness. Pour over me your holiness... I offer all I am for the mercy of your plan. Help me be strong. Help me be. Help me."

People may talk about us as followers of Jesus Christ as being a little bit crazy, like what was said about Abram. They may mock us for believing in the words found in some old book, that we think God has a plan for us, that by following Jesus we're going to make it to heaven. They may think we're in la la land.

Hope, if it were a town, would be a place that not many visit and even fewer stay. It can be a tough place to live. Sometimes it can feel like it should be called "hopeless."

Like the song about Mary - though we're frightened, weary, waiting and wondering - may the Breath of Heaven be with us now. May he hold us together. Be forever near us. Lighten our darkness. Pour over us His Holiness. Help us be strong. Help us be. Help us. This Christmas may we open our lives to catch more breaths of what God has in store of the hope that is ours in Christ, the one who was born in the manger to die as our Savior to reign as King.